

Whispers in the Dark

by Charlene Newcomb; Illustrations by Mike Vilardi

Wink Tasion grumbled quietly to himself. He knew the scout troopers he was monitoring were about to switch frequencies. He could tell by the tone of their voices, though he didn't understand more than one word out of five because of the static on the comm channel.

He looked up from his workstation as a movement across the room caught his eye. He nodded to Alex Winger as she came into the underground's operations center. *Now there's one bright spot for the day*, he thought to himself. She aimed her finger at him like it was a blaster. He grinned, shaking his head -- it was a standing joke between them going back almost a year.

Alex had been in two of his classes at the university. Back then, Wink had known her as the daughter of the Imperial Governor of Garos IV, not as one of the most valuable members of the underground. So, when she waltzed into the ops center on his very first day there, he nearly shot her. Thank the Force one of his comrades stopped him. And fortunately, Alex had a great sense of humor!

"I saw that grimace on your face from across the room," she kidded him as she came up to peer over his shoulder.

"Lousy signal today," he said, handing her a spare headset. "Hey, Mika, can you give me an ear!" he called to the supervisor at another intercept station two seats away.

Mika Kaebra pulled up a display of Imperial channels being monitored by the ops, then keyed Wink's channel to listen in. As the comm chief for this monitoring station in Ariana, he scanned the Imperial wavelengths for interesting message traffic. And the ops could always count on his help when a problem came up.

Today he had five operators -- typical for the early part of the day. Two were assigned the task of monitoring scout trooper communications at the mining center complex south of Ariana. One worked on comms between the complex and Imperial Headquarters in the city, and the other two kept track of message traffic to and from the outside world and other outposts on Garos IV.

Alex grimaced as static shattered the airwaves. "I can't hear a thing -- did they move?"

"I think so." Wink hesitated, straining to hear any sign of life. There it was! "Somebody's still there -- hold on -- "

"I can hear him." *Barely*, Mika thought, as he listened in one ear and began scanning channels in the other ear. "What's he saying?"

They listened as a distant voice tried to talk over the static. "It's TK-21. He's calling for directions," Wink said.

"Guess he's having as much trouble hearing as we are!" Mika observed. "Come on 21, where's your boss?" he told the scout trooper he was monitoring, knowing the man wouldn't have heard him even if the channel was free of interference. You had to have a sense of humor sitting at these intercept stations for hours on end, or else you could go nuts.

"Who's on channel B-2?" another op called.

"That could be your guys, Wink. Check it out," Mika told him.

"B-2," Wink repeated, as he switched channels.

"TK-21 still calling for help," Mika told him.

Wink listened to the conversation for several seconds. "Yeah -- that's them. Boss just sent TK-16 to call 21."

"Okay," Mika said, "I'll close 'em up here for now."

Wink gave Mika a grin and a thumbs up sign. The signal on B-2 was so much clearer. This scout trooper unit they were monitoring was a new network the underground had discovered about a week earlier. The troopers were setting up the new perimeter defense system at the mining center complex where the Imperials were digging in, literally.

The Empire had wised up after the underground had attacked several of their supply convoys. Sensors were being placed in a five-kilometer radius around the mining center, which included areas where the underground had hidden weapons caches. That meant the underground would have a more difficult time observing activity near the mines, let alone retrieving their own weapons.

What once had been a small garrison of Imperial troops had in recent months blossomed into nearly 500 officers in Ariana alone. Plus all the support staff and scouts and stormtroopers that accompanied them, including those assigned to the mining center. The underground

had never faced conditions such as these. It used to be relatively easy to steal Imperial equipment, waylay food supplies, and attack the few outposts the Empire had established. But all that had changed.

Confronted with ever-increasing odds, the freedom fighters of Garos IV were determined to continue the fight. As one of their leaders told them, they'd just have to chip away at the block one piece at a time. A small victory was a victory nonetheless.

Alex set down the headset, patted Wink on the back and headed across the room to talk with Magir Paca, one of the leaders of the resistance movement. He was studying the master display with Lieutenant Dair Haslip. No one was sure what was stranger: seeing someone in an Imperial officer's uniform down here, or working with the daughter of the Imperial Governor.

"Paca. Dair," Alex greeted the two men.

"Hello, Alex," Paca said.

She nodded toward the display. "More bad news?"

"General Zakar has requested another 2,000 troops," Dair explained.

"Two thousand?" Alex exclaimed.

"Well, it's not unexpected," Paca said. "With our continued harassment of their scouts, and the obvious importance of the mines, I guess Zakar wants to be sure he can deliver when the next Star Destroyer returns for a pickup."

"Still no word on where the Imperials are shipping the ore?" Alex asked.

"Not a word. I'm almost positive General Zakar doesn't even know," Dair said, though he could hardly believe it himself.

"Secrecy seems to be an extremely high priority."

Paca grunted. "That's ironic, isn't it? They are increasing troop strength and adding sensors yet they want to keep this whole operation quiet! Mark my words, friends. The New Republic will hear about this. They'll track down that secret base," Paca said, hoping he sounded more confident than he felt. Like everyone else, he had heard the rumors about the New Republic's push toward Coruscant. If Coruscant fell, it might be only a matter of time until they would sweep toward Garos IV.

Alex gazed at the master display with a far-off look in her eyes. She never told her friends about the visions. Visions of airspeeders sweeping down into the mining center complex. Visions of a battle in the heavens around Garos IV. "The Force is with us," she said. Her voice turned to barely a whisper. "They will come. I'm sure of it."

The two men stared at Alex. Just the way she'd said it gave them hope for the future. But still, in the back of their minds they wondered if the underground could continue to operate against the better equipped Empire. Could they hold out until the New Republic came to help?

"What about construction at the mines?" Alex asked when she realized they were looking at her.

"The last of the barracks will be ready for occupancy in two or three weeks," Dair told them. "They can easily house 1,200 people at the complex."

"And the bunker?" Paca asked.

"From the reports I've read, construction is nearly complete. It's predicted to be operational within a week -- *if* they get delivery of those Anscot systems control units for the sensors."

"When they get those sensors activated, the place will be nearly impenetrable," Alex observed.

Dair and Paca looked at each other, then at Alex. They were both surprised by her remark. She wasn't the type to ever give up.

Alex caught their stares. "I said *nearly* impenetrable!"

"Don't worry, Alex. I bet you'll find a weak spot!" Dair said, only half-kidding.

She grinned at him, shaking her head.

"You haven't heard anything about the control units?" Paca asked Dair.

"Probably the same things Mika and his ops are hearing. They're just trying to figure out when the things will be ready to ship from Garan."

Paca nodded. "Okay, keep your ears open."

"Paca," Mika called him from across the room. "We've got a problem. Check this out."

Paca, Dair, and Alex peered over Mika's shoulder as he transcribed, practically word-for-word, the conversation he was eaves-dropping on.

"Do you have a fix on his location?" Dair asked.

"Not yet," Mika said, not even pausing as his fingers flew across the keyboard. "Jaytee, pick up channel A," he called to another op as two of the voices split off the main network.

"Got it," Jaytee confirmed.

"Damn," Paca cursed softly as he read the messages between TK-32 and his squadron commander.

"I've got the location," Mika reported. "Put it on the master," Paca told him, turning to look as a red blip appeared on the display. Alex shook her head. The Imperials had located one of the underground's weapons stashes in a cave not far from the mining center.

Paca punched up something on his own datapad -- a readout of what was stored in that location. "Small arms," he said. "Thank the Force they haven't discovered the Plex missile launcher we've got hidden out there!" A small consolation -- the underground needed every weapon it could lay its hands on. He made an entry to signal all the teams about the Imperials' discovery and a note to discuss how to move other weapons away from that area. Then he noticed that Jaytee was busy at his intercept station. "What are your guys doing?"

"Discussing security at the governor's mansion."

So my father finally ordered guards for the house, Alex thought. I may have to move to the University after all. "Dair, why don't you join the Governor and me for dinner tonight. We can test their security set-up. We'll need to know what's going on around the mansion before we attempt to move our weapons from the caves."

"Good idea, Alex," Paca said.

"I'll come by your office later and issue a formal invitation," Alex told Dair.

"Okay."

"Be careful," Paca told them.

Alex gave him a cockeyed grin. "Hey, have you ever known me to take risks?" She paused, then pointed a finger at him. "Don't answer that!"

Paca laughed, shaking his head. "Can you brief us tomorrow on the set-up?"

"I have class at 0900. How about 1030?" She chuckled, pointing to Jaytee who was still listening to the two scout troopers at the mansion. "I bet Jaytee will know as much as I do!"

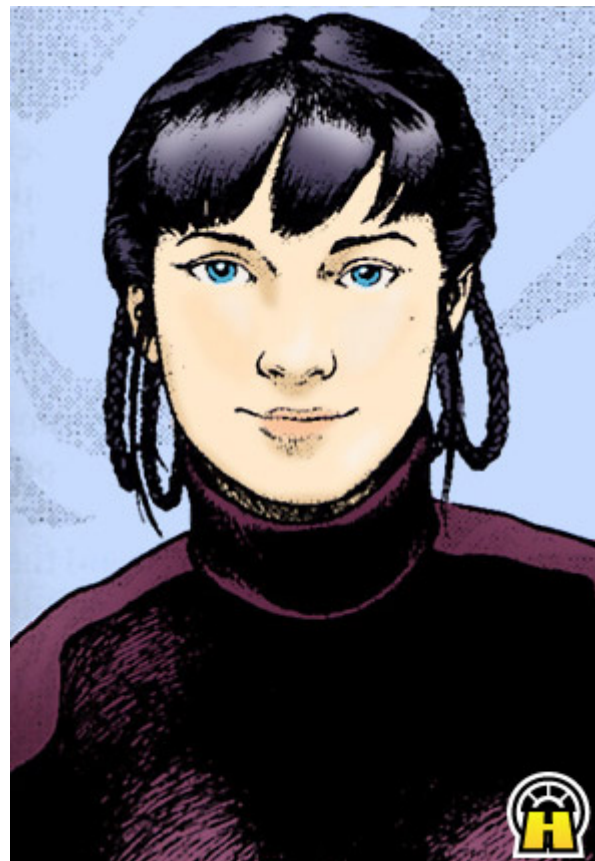
"Right." Paca smiled. "1030 tomorrow."

"Done," she said, heading across the room toward the door into the tunnels.

Paca and Dair watched her go. There was something very special about Alex Winger. Both men shared the same thought as the door into the tunnel system slid shut behind her. *The Force will be with us.*

* * *

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," Alex greeted the two officers in General Zakar's reception area. "Is Lieutenant. Haslip available?"



"Miss Winger," Lieutenant Nilo said, "a pleasure to see you again. The Lieutenant just stepped out. I'm sure he'll be back in a few moments."

"All right. I'll wait for him," she said, taking a seat near the window that overlooked the avenue. She hid the disgust she felt seeing the street busy with military traffic.

Dair entered the room. "Alex, um, Miss Winger," he stammered.

"How are you?"

Alex stood up. "I'm fine, Lieutenant," she said, glancing at the other two men who pretended to ignore a scene they'd witnessed on several occasions.

"What can I do for you today?" he asked.

"My father and I would like you to join us for dinner this evening," she said, a slight blush coming to her cheeks.

Lieutenant Nilo could hear the tremble in her voice and threw a sly grin to Lieutenant Polg. Normally, Alexandra Winger was so poised and confident. Obviously, she wasn't as cool in matters of the heart.

Dair had his back to the other officers in the room. He hid his grin, playing the part like an actor in a scene from a play.

"I would love to have dinner with you," he said.

"Why don't you come by about six. Father won't arrive before seven, so we'll have time to take a walk along the Cliffs and enjoy the view."

"There's only one view I want, Alexandra," he said quietly, knowing that Nilo and Polg still would overhear him.

Alex looked up at him and smiled, then turned toward the door. "See you tonight, Lieutenant," she called back to him.

Dair stood there and sighed as the door slid shut behind her. Nilo and Polg were chuckling to themselves. It was obvious to them that Dair Haslip was head over heels in love.



"See you tonight, Lieutenant," Nilo repeated, mimicking Alex.

Dair glared at him. "Oh, shut up," he said, straightening his uniform. "What are you looking at anyway?!"

"Nothing, Lieutenant," Nilo said innocently.

"Well, let's get back to work."

* * *

"Good evening, Lieutenant Haslip," the servant droid greeted Dair. "Mistress Alexandra is waiting for you on the patio."

"Thank you, Seetee," Dair said. "I'll find my own way."

"Of course, sir."

The view from the Imperial Governor's mansion was probably one of the best anywhere along the Tahika Cliffs. Alex stood there, gazing out at the calm sea, as the last hour of sunlight sparkled across the water. She heard Dair approach and turned to greet him, a smile on her face. He took her in his arms and kissed her on the lips, which caught her by surprise.

"I saw two scout troopers at the front of the house," he whispered in her ear. "Anyone back here who might be watching us?"

"Yes," she said, understanding the reason for this display of affection. "There are two more patrolling the grounds that I know about."

"Okay," he said, pulling away from her but planting a gentle kiss on her forehead. "It's getting rather crowded out here, isn't it?"

"Let's take a walk by the Cliffs," she suggested. "We've got at least an hour until dinner."

He took Alex's hand in his and led her down the old stone steps to the grounds below. She could feel his nervousness and knew it wasn't because he was worried about the scout troopers.

"Isn't it beautiful here?" she asked him when they stood at the edge of the Cliffs.

Dair wasn't looking at the view. "Beautiful," he said quietly. Alex looked at him, sensing his thoughts.

"Alex, I --"

"Shh!" she whispered. "I like you, Dair. You're a good friend. Working together like this against the Empire -- well, you know -- I just don't want to give you the wrong impression. Please don't make our lives any more complicated than they already are."

He knew she was right. He'd had this same conversation with himself a thousand times. "I understand, Alex."

She smiled shyly at him but there was a glint of youthful exuberance in her eyes. "Hey, c'mon! I'll race you!"

She'd taken off before he could remind her they needed to look halfway decent for dinner with the Governor. But he trotted after her, finally catching up when she stopped suddenly to look around. They were close to the mines, maybe three kilometers or so. For a moment, she had a fleeting sense of danger. But then it was gone.

"What's wrong?" he asked her.

She frowned, shrugging her shoulders. "It's nothing. Let's see how long it takes them to track us," she said, taking his hand and leading him down another pathway that skirted the edge of the Cliffs.

They'd walked about five minutes when Alex plopped down on the ground. "This looks like a good spot," she commented.

"A good spot?" he asked. "Yes. For them to find us."

"Okay, if you say so."

Alex glanced at her chronometer. "It sure is taking them a while."

"Maybe they aren't patrolling this area on a regular basis. And you know their speeder bike sensors aren't all that reliable around the Cliffs," he said.

"Could be," she agreed, looking off in the direction of the caves about a half-kilometer away. She wondered how easy it might be to move the Plex missile launcher that the underground had hidden nearby. If it took those scout troopers this long to find them ?

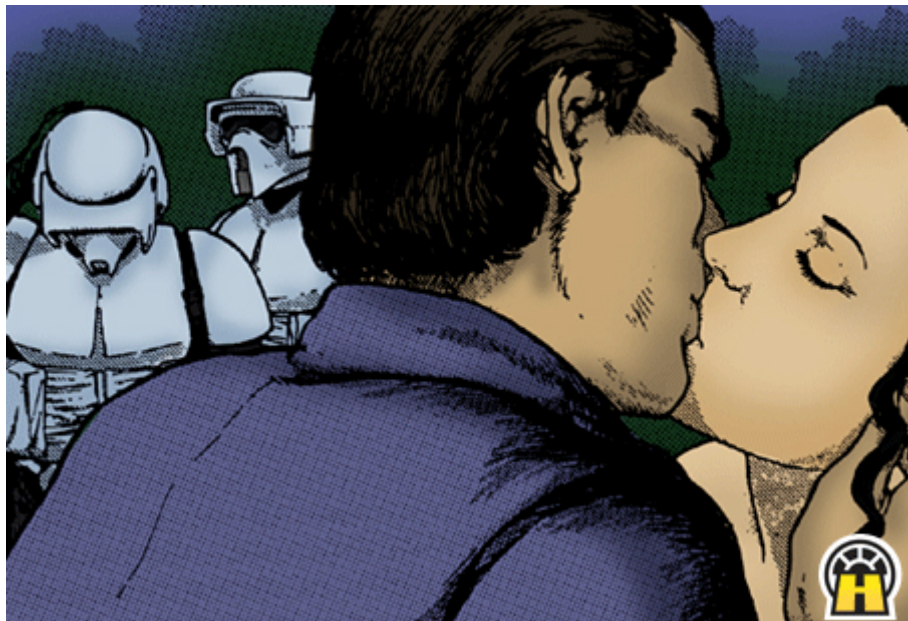
"They're coming," she said, that same far-off look in her eyes that he'd seen earlier in the day at the operations center.

Dair strained to hear the sounds of speeder bikes. "I don't hear a thing," he said.

"Shh!"

Ten seconds later the whine of engines became clear. He was amazed at her keen sense of hearing -- or was it something else? He shook his head in disbelief and stared at her.

Alex moved closer to him. "Now, remember, this is just a job." She hesitated, looking



away for a moment. Then she looked him straight in the eyes. "Are you ready?" she asked him.

"Huh? Ready for what?" he asked as the speeder bikes grew closer.

"For this --" she leaned over and gently kissed him, ignoring the speeder bikes that had stopped a few meters away.

Dair took to the part like a natural, needing no encouragement whatsoever. He was oblivious to the approaching footsteps, never breaking the kiss.

Alex finally opened her eyes and saw the two scout troopers standing over them.

"Dair," she said, pulling away from him. "We have company."

"What the --" He got up and faced the troopers.

"Sorry, Lieutenant, but this area is off limits," one of the men told him.

"Off limits?" Alex cried. "This property belongs to my father!"

The trooper eyed the young woman for a moment. "Orders from General Zakar, Miss Winger."

Alex glared at the trooper, then stalked off.

"Alex, wait!" Dair called. "Thanks a lot," he told the trooper sarcastically. "Alex!"

Dair caught up with her, putting his arm around her shoulders.

She was trembling. But when he saw the look on her face, he had to keep himself from laughing.

"Good show," he whispered.

"We'll be the talk of the barracks tonight," she laughed.

* * *

Alex rubbed her eyes. Only the soft glow from the moonlight lit her room. She sat up in the bed, trying to imagine what Paca would say if he knew what she was about to do. She chuckled to herself. What was it she had said to him yesterday -- have you ever known me to take risks? *Oh well*, she thought.

That Plex missile launcher was all she could think about. It was so close, barely a kilometer from the governor's mansion. The Plex had to be moved before the Imperials found it. And Alex was in the best position to do just that. After her little experiment with Dair earlier in the evening, she was sure she could slip in and out of the area quickly enough to avoid detection.

Alex climbed out of bed and dressed, then studied the grounds around the mansion. No sign of any scout troopers. "Nothing like a midnight stroll," she said to herself.

Getting out of the house was even easier than Alex had imagined. She went out through the back down to the grounds, and headed due south, running parallel to the Cliffs. Less than 30 meters from the mansion the trees offered good cover.

The forest was abuzz with nocturnal sounds. Alex could barely hear her own footsteps on the forest floor over the evening song of the crupas that dwelt in the trees. And the boetays howled at Garos' moons, lending their voices to the harmony of the night. The sound of Imperial speeder bikes did not intrude on this natural symphony.

Alex covered the distance to the caves in a little over ten minutes, and she felt safe hidden deep within their shadows. She rested for a few minutes before slinging the missile launcher over her shoulder and heading back out into the night. At the mouth of the cave she peered into the darkness. Still no sign of scout troopers. They were out there, but they weren't too close -- at least she didn't think so.

Turning westward, Alex made her way toward the Cliffs. She decided to travel back by a slightly different route. If anyone approached, it would be very easy to throw the Plex over the side of the Cliffs.

No one interrupted her jog until, within sight of the mansion, Alex sensed someone nearby. She couldn't believe she'd gotten so close to recovering the Plex and now might have to toss it. She couldn't let that happen. Moving quickly, she dropped to the ground, throwing leaves and some fallen tree branches on top of the launcher. She was more than ten meters away from it when the speeder bike came up behind her.

Her heart raced. She took a few deep breaths to calm herself. The scout trooper pulled his bike up beside her. Alex stopped when she noticed he had his blaster drawn.

"What do you want?" she asked him, indicating by the tone of her voice that she was quite irritated by his appearance.

He peered at her, shining a light in her face. "Who are you?" he asked.

"I am Alexandra Winger, daughter of the Imperial Governor," she said in her haughtiest voice.

He hesitated for a moment, studying her closely. "What are you doing out here this late at night, Miss Winger?"

"What does it look like I'm doing? I couldn't sleep, so I came out for a walk. Now, if you don't mind --" she started to walk away from him.

"I'll accompany you back to the mansion, Miss Winger."

"All right," she agreed, "if you insist."

"And may I suggest that next time you want to take a walk in the middle of the night, you ask for an escort. It's hard for us to protect you if you take off by yourself," he told her.

She nodded as he followed her up to the mansion.

"Good night, Miss Winger," he called as she walked up the stone steps to the patio.

As the scout trooper rode away from the hidden launcher, Alex took one last look toward the Cliffs. She breathed a sigh of relief. The missile launcher would be safe for the time being. She didn't think it would be too difficult to get it back to the underground ops center -- but she decided to think about that problem tomorrow.

* * *

Dair Haslip sat at his desk trying to work. General Zakar was expecting this report on the bunker construction at the mining center.

Dair looked over at Nilo who was on the vidcomm with Major General Carner. Nilo did not look happy, but the conversation sure sounded interesting.

He turned to stare out the window. It was late in the day. He stretched, flexing his arms above his head, then got up and walked over to the window. Chado's Pub occupied the first floor of the building across the street. The action was beginning to pick up over there as the workday slowly drew to a close. A light shone brightly from an open window. Dair double-checked it quickly -- second window from the left, third floor. *Looks like Paca 's called a meeting for tonight.* He sighed, rubbed his eyes, and returned to his desk. It was going to be a long day.

General Zakar burst through the door, with Lieutenant Polg hot on his heels.

"Haslip, how's that report coming along?" the General asked, not even bothering to stop.

"It will be on your desk first thing in the morning, sir."

"Good." Zakar walked into his office with Polg right behind him. Dair got up and followed them in. The General glanced at the reports on his desk. Every time he stepped away for more than an hour, they seemed to proliferate. Ironical that he had just asked for another one from Haslip.

"Polg, arrange a meeting with Governor Winger and Major General Carner tomorrow afternoon. I'll have to review Haslip's report before that meeting, so be sure to keep my schedule open." He glanced at Dair. "How long will I need, Haslip?"

"About a half-hour, General," Dair replied.

"All right. See if you can squeeze that in."

"Yes, sir," Polg said, making an entry on his datapad. "Will there be anything else, General?"

"No, that will be all for now, Lieutenant."

"Sir?"

"Yes, Haslip?"

"Councilor Baro has been trying to get through to you all day."

"Baro?" he asked, searching his memory. "Ah, yes, the one from Zila."

"Yes, sir. The Councilor is concerned about our activities there," Dair told him.

Zakar scowled. "Is he now?" He shook his head impatiently. "Just remind him who is in charge, Haslip. I will tell him what he needs to know, when and if he needs to know it." *And if my superiors ever clue me in on their objectives.*

"Yes, sir. I'll tell him that, sir. I'll get to work on that report now."

The door slid shut behind him.

Nilo was just ending his conversation with Major General Carner. He rolled his eyes. "Generals," he said softly, gritting his teeth. "What's Carner doing? Giving you a hard time?" Dair chuckled.

Nilo glared at him, throwing him a frown. "Oh, he's upset about the shipping orders for the systems control units."

Polg looked up from his work amused by the conversation. "What else is new?" he asked.

"General Zakar only authorized two squadrons of scout troopers to move the parts from Garan to the mines. And Carner wants more protection for the convoy. So, who gets yelled at? Me!"

Very interesting. "That's what lieutenants are for, Nilo," Dair said.

"Join the club!" Polg said. He'd been on the receiving end of that kind of behavior too many times to count.

"Try not to take it personally, Nilo. Garner's been on everyone's case because of the underground's activities," Dair reminded him.

"Yeah, I know. Guess I better pass on Garner's complaint to the General. I wouldn't want to be derelict in my duties, now, would I?"

Dair shook his head. He wondered what the General would add --another squadron of scouts, or maybe an AT-ST? You could always count on the Empire to make things more difficult for the freedom fighters.

A buzz from the intercom interrupted their short break from work.

"Yes, General?"

"Polg, bring me the latest updates on the sensor placements at the mining center," the voice from the other room boomed.

"I'll get that for you right away, General."

Dair and Nilo looked at each other as Polg furiously keyed up the requested file and transferred it to a datacard. Poor Polg, the General always kept him running. He was up from his desk in less than 30 seconds. Nilo shrugged his shoulders, got up, and followed Polg into Zakar's office.

Dair checked his chronometer again. As soon as he finished this report he could get out of here and have dinner before checking in with Paca in the underground ops center.

It was definitely going to be a long night.

* * *

"Did you hear that, Mika?" Jaytee asked.

"I got it -- 41 hours -- that would be 0800, day after tomorrow," Mika replied after overhearing the conversation about the shipment of units needed to bring the sensors on-line at the mining center. He clicked on his comlink. "Paca," he called into the device, "we've got something you'll be interested in."

Paca appeared from the adjacent room. Jaytee had already transferred the information he'd want to a datacard. He stood up at his intercept station waving the card in Paca's direction.

"Systems control units -- they're ready to ship from Garan. All the arrangements are right here," Jaytee said.

"Great. Mika, alert our teams to stand by for orders," Paca told them as Jaytee handed him the datacard.

His mind was already hard at work. This was the information they'd been anticipating for several days. The Imperials had been working on parts for the computer systems controls in Garan because the fleet had been so occupied by the New Republic, they'd been unable to supply a few vital components for the sensor systems at the mines.

Paca delicately fingered the datacard. He smiled to himself, knowing the precious information it contained. Now the under-ground would have a chance to destroy that shipment before it ever reached the mines.

* * *

The old Currahen Highway was as quiet as usual for 1300 hours. The highway north of Garan was a main route to Ariana about 40 kilometers to the northwest. It was always well travelled. But this section, south of the city, led to the mines and only recently had seen an increase in traffic. Imperial traffic.

The attack on the supply convoy would come at the Currahen Crossroads, about 12 kilometers southwest of Garan. The Crossroads were located in a high mountain pass, and offered several escape options for the freedom fighters -- narrow paths westward toward the Tahika Cliffs, southeast to the lower Morcur Valley, or back into Garan.

Dair Haslip had been able to confirm late the afternoon before that three speeder trucks were loaded and ready to go from the distribution center in Garan. According to the information he had, the trucks would be escorted by two scout trooper squadrons and at least one AT-ST. A forward observer had seen a second AT-ST move through the mountains toward Garan during the night.

The freedom fighters had been staking out the hills surrounding the Crossroads since the pre-dawn hours. At 0700 word had come through that a new departure time had been set for 0930. And so they waited.

They were still waiting.

The weather had turned nasty. Storm clouds rolled in from the coast before noon. It had been pouring down rain for over an hour. Visibility was poor as a dense fog enshrouded the hillsides. If she hadn't known better, Alex would have sworn it was dusk rather than noontime.

"Thanks, Cardy," she said as one of her comrades handed her a hot mug of tea from his thermajug.

"What do you think happened to the convoy?" he asked. "They should have been here long ago."

Alex warmed her hands on the mug. "You're not worried, are you?" she asked him.

"No. It's just all this waiting that gets to me," he said, taking a sip from his own mug.

"Yeah, I know what you mean. But we would have heard something if they weren't coming." She looked through her macrobinoculars. "They'll be here," she reassured him. A distant thunderclap echoed through the forest. It sent a chill up her spine.

"How's that new baby doing?" Alex asked, trying to lighten Cardy's dark mood.

He smiled. "He's getting so big! Crawling all over -- "

A buzz from the comlink startled both of them. That was the signal. The speeder trucks should be coming into view any moment now. "Here we go!" Cardy whispered, as he moved away from her farther up the hill.

A metallic grating reverberated through the hills -- the movement of heavy machinery -- AT-STs! *There's one*, Alex thought as it moved through the sight of her blaster rifle. Three speeder trucks surrounded by scout troopers followed it. A second AT-ST brought up the rear.

This was it --

A missile whooshed over Alex's head. One of the AT-STs exploded into a thousand pieces. Ten scout troopers fell in the first volley of blaster fire from the hillsides. Another blast from the Plex nicked the other walker. Scout troopers poured off the road and scattered into the hills.

The second AT-ST locked onto the Plex missile launcher that had taken out its companion. An explosion lit the side of the mountain just above Alex.

She heard Cardy's agonizing scream and ran up the hillside to check on him.

"Cardy?" she yelled above the sounds of the battle as explosions continued to burst all around her. She spotted the launcher and made her way toward it -- it looked like it had been carelessly tossed aside like a toy a child had tired of. Cardy was lying a meter away, mortally wounded.

"Get -- missile --" he stammered.

"Come on, I'll get you out of here," she told him. She struggled to get her arm under his shoulders, knowing in her heart that her efforts were futile. And Cardy knew it too.

"No -- too late -- for me," he said, choking on his words. He took one last breath, and died. Another friend gone. Alex clenched her fist thinking of the child that would never know this brave man. She pulled him close, closing her eyes and hugging the lifeless body in her arms for a few brief seconds.

A shot whizzed past her head. She laid Cardy's body down, then grabbed the Plex and headed down the hill. She was determined to take out that other AT-ST. A scout trooper passed by almost close enough to touch, but didn't spot her.

On the eastern side of the road Alex's companions lobbed grenades at the speeder trucks, courageously ignoring the AT-ST that sought them out. One truck exploded in a mighty fireball. The walker locked on target. But Alex was ready. She fired the Plex before the AT-ST had a chance to get off a shot. The cab burst into flames, showering the road with debris and setting a second truck on fire.

Alex's comlink buzzed. That was the signal to retreat. One of the scout troopers must have moved out of jamming range and had called for help. She slung the Plex over her shoulder and turned away from the road, heading back into the hills.

Blaster fire echoed on the mountainside as the scout troopers continued their pursuit of the freedom fighters. Fortunately for Alex and her friends, the terrain made tracking difficult. And with their sensors jammed, the Imperials had to rely on visual sightings in territory that the underground knew much better.



At the summit of Adni's Hill, Alex caught up with two of her comrades. Together they made their way five kilometers through the underbrush to a hidden landspeeder, never seeing one sign of the enemy. But they were aware of the distant sounds of battle. Each one thought about the ambush, their friends, their own survival, and their willingness to carry the fight on to another day. Thoughts they shared in common, yet never spoke aloud.

The landspeeder wound through the narrow mountain paths. The rain had finally ended, but the mists in the forest lent an eerie glow to the sunlight that fought to break through the clouds.

They arrived at the first drop point almost an hour later. Alex bid her companions goodbye and watched them round a curve in the road before she walked the half-kilometer to her own speeder.

She sat down at the controls and for the first time in hours and realized how exhausted and cold and wet she was. She took a deep breath, closing her eyes for a few seconds. That's when the vision appeared. It was brief, but more vivid than any dream she'd ever had --

It was so cold -- and every muscle in her body ached -- a hand was extended out to hers -- 'Alex, take my hand,' a voice yelled above the howling wind -- as fingertip met fingertip against a backdrop of white, on a snowy mountainside, she looked up -- and perched above her, with a hand stretched out to hers, was the man from a dream she'd had -- the man with the sandy brown hair and blue eyes --

And as suddenly as it began, the vision abruptly ended.

Alex opened her eyes. Her hands trembled as she grabbed the controls of the speeder. *Who are you?* she thought. *Why are you in my dreams?*

Then, an overwhelming feeling of calm touched her soul. Somewhere, in the back of her mind, a voice seemed to be calling softly to her. He whispered to her through the darkness, but the message was loud and clear.

The Force will be with you.